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ABSTRACT

The question of whether teaching is truly a profession and what can be done to improve it is examined in this bulletin. Although commonly viewed as a profession, teaching lacks many of the characteristics of a true profession. Teachers have little authority over their work, lack the minimum amenities and working conditions expected by other professionals, and lack the rewards and status of other professions. Transforming education into a profession is part of the solution for achieving excellence in the schools. This means establishing professional standards, ensuring professional delivery of service, providing a professional working environment, and granting educators the freedom to exercise professional judgment through participative management. Recommendations are made for the creation of clear state standards and requirements for teaching and the reduction of bureaucracy. (16 references) (LMI)

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INSIGHTS ON EDUCATIONAL POLICY AND PRACTICE

Number 9 May 1989

Professionalizing Teaching

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Professionalizing Teaching

Despite references to its professional calling, teaching lacks many of the characteristics of a true profession. Teachers have little authority over their work, lack the minimum amenities and working conditions expected by other professionals, and lack the rewards and status of other professions. Transforming education into a profession is part of the solution for achieving excellence in the schools. This means establishing professional standards, ensuring professional delivery of service, furnishing a professional working environment, and providing educators the freedom to exercise their professional judgement through participative management.

Characteristics of A Profession

Although we talk about the teaching profession and teachers as professionals, teaching is not a full-fledged profession. The Carnegie Task Force on Teaching as a Profession (1986) described a profession as being characterized by:

1. control of the standards for entering the profession and advancing within it;
2. delivery of service based on rigorous academic preparation in a body of knowledge specific to the profession;
3. the freedom to exercise professional judgment;
4. pay structures that reward increased competence, leadership, and productivity;
5. working environments that provide the clerical and other paraprofessional support that allows professionals to be more productive.

Teaching Lacks Characteristics of a Profession

Few of the characteristics listed above apply to teaching. The Carnegie Task Force (1986) pointed out that few teachers in America enjoy the authority, status, and working conditions routinely taken for granted by professionals in business, government, and the non-profit sector. Teachers do not control the technology of teaching, entrance into the profession, or the standards of professional performance, nor do they regulate the professional behavior of practicing teachers (Corwin & Borman, 1987). Teachers' freedom to exercise professional judgment is often constrained by a top-down bureaucratic system that largely dictates how and what the teacher is to teach. In general, the practicing teacher functions in a context where the beliefs and expectations are those of a profession but where the realities in actual practice compare more to a trade (Goodlad, 1984). Teachers usually have little voice in the most fundamental policies pertaining to district and school-wide practices.

Lack of Authority. Some writers suggest that teacher classroom autonomy is evidence that teachers have the authority and the power to make decisions (Huberman, 1983). However, the isolation of classrooms has been confused with autonomy. If teachers had autonomy, they would have both the authority to establish the goals of teaching and the power to control the resources for achieving those goals. Authority is the freedom to act within a framework provided by policy and law, the opportunity to make decisions within an area of professional expertise (Frymier, 1987). In too many cases, teachers have neither power nor authority; instead, they simply have isolation.

Lack of Rewards. A study by Roueche and Baker (1986) found that the nation's best teachers and principals are among the most poorly rewarded professionals in the public sector today in terms of both their work environment and job demands.

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Extrinsic rewards such as comfortable working conditions, adequate clerical support, rewards or recognition for outstanding performance, opportunities for promotion to greater responsibility, suitable pay, and fringe benefits are the expected conditions of work in every profession except teaching. In a Metropolitan Life survey of former teachers, the majority believed that salaries, professional prestige, control over one's work, equipment availability, and the chance to be stimulated intellectually were all increased in their new vocations (*Education Daily*, March 17, 1986).

Lack of a Professional Working Environment. John J. Creedon, president and CEO of Metropolitan Life, stated, "The bitter truth is that, although we might call teaching a profession, we treat teachers as if they are low-level workers whose only hope for advancement comes with leaving " (cited in Roper & Hoffman, 1986). The tasks for which support staff are routinely responsible in professional work environments are typically done in schools by the teachers themselves. Researchers estimate that between 10% and 50% of teachers' time is devoted to tasks that have nothing to do with instruction, while time to teach, to plan, to grow professionally, and to work with their colleagues on improving student performance is limited (Carnegie Task Force on Teaching as a Profession, 1986). Most schools are not organized to support the systematic improvement of teaching. The school day, year, and budget do not include professional growth as a significant activity incorporating those components that produce improvements in performance (Bird, 1984).

Changing Teaching Into A Profession

Teaching should be transformed into a profession for the same reason that led to the development of other professions — the need to participate in control over the quality of services. Teachers are qualified to share in developing and maintaining professional standards and to share in those decisions that affect the quality of their working conditions and the quality of their students' learning conditions.

Professional Standards. Professions have arrangements with the state whereby they have both the right and the obligation to control the quality of members of their profession (Wise, 1988). Professions have boards that establish standards and regulate the licensing of individuals into the profession. Standards make an explicit statement about what is worth knowing, how it should be learned, and how it should be demonstrated. A major goal of teacher licensure is to increase the probability that those admitted to practice can make appropriate decisions and teach effectively. The Carnegie Task Force on Teaching as a Profession (1986) has recommended the creation of a National Board of Professional Teaching Standards to establish such licensing procedures for the teaching profession.

Ensuring Professional Delivery of Service. Professionals have an obligation to acquire and use new options, knowledge, or techniques and to apply them appropriately. Therefore, the licensure system should not only require evidence that these skills have been learned but also provide the opportunity to learn them. Because the acquisition of teaching skill is so dependent on developing judgement in complex, non-routine situations, the prospective teacher should have an opportunity to encounter and work through many of the common problems of teaching. A structured internship has been recommended as an integral component of teacher education and as a prerequisite for certification. This would give teachers an opportunity to learn to put theory into practice, to learn those aspects of the job that cannot be taught in the preservice college classroom, and to practice complex decision making under the supervision of experienced practitioners (Wise & Darling-Hammond, 1987).

Freedom to Exercise Professional Judgement. Making teaching a profession means increasing teachers' rights and responsibilities (Green, 1987). High-quality service cannot be prescribed in detail. In creating the right conditions for learning, teachers make decisions based on their knowledge of the student, of the subject matter, and of instructional techniques (Wise, 1988). The potential for success is increased by bringing together the combined judgment and expertise of a group of professionals. Collegiality is crucial when dealing with professional tasks (Roper & Hoffman, 1986).

Teachers, working together with administrators, will be most effective when they are free to exercise their professional judgement within the con-

text of a limited set of clear standards set by state and local policy makers. The exercise of professional judgement includes the prerogative to strongly influence a wide range of decisions such as the materials and instructional methods to be used, the staffing structure to be employed, the organization of the school day, the assignment of students, the consultants to be used, and the allocation of resources available to the school (Carnegie Task Force on Teaching as a Profession, 1986).

A Professional Working Environment. The Carnegie Task Force described a professional environment for teaching as one in which there would be more time for all teachers to reflect, to plan, and to discuss teaching innovations and problems with their colleagues. In order to provide the amount of time required for this, however, additional staff would be needed to support the professional teachers. This would require a radical reorganization of work roles to assure the most efficient use of professional staff in such an environment. School systems based on bureaucratic authority would have to be replaced by collegial systems in which the professional competence of both administrators and teachers is recognized.

Societal pressures and management practices are increasing the demands for all members of an organization to have greater participation in management decisions (Hatfield, Blackman, & Claypool, 1986). Successful companies develop management styles and characteristics aimed at empowering people. The implications for improving school management, where teachers are highly educated but usually have little involvement in decision making, are both significant and far reaching.

The Maryland Commission on School-Based Administration (1987) identified three areas in the professional work environment of teachers that need improvement: the reduction of bureaucracy, more professional autonomy for teachers, and more leadership opportunities for teachers. Including teachers in school leadership, decision making, and problem solving has the potential to provide overburdened administrators with assistance in a number of areas, from instructional leadership to evaluation. It also provides teachers with an incentive they value if they believe there is potential for real influence, not merely token or passive involvement (Guthrie & Reed, 1986).

Expanding the leadership team to include teachers, however, means more than just creating a few new roles or giving the principal some help. It means finding new ways of organizing schools to create an open, collaborative mode of work to replace teacher isolation (Lieberman, 1988). The experiences of those schools and districts that have incorporated teacher-leader roles into their organizational structure demonstrate that collegiality among educators is not something that just happens. Collegiality must be developed and nurtured in a climate characterized by open communication, sharing, and willingness to learn (Ruck, 1986).

Conclusions

Creating a professional environment for teaching in schools will be impossible unless teachers, administrators, and school boards cooperate in the effort to make it happen. State policy makers have the power to shape local incentives and will have to create many of the enabling conditions. It will be up to the states to set clear standards and requirements and to remove from the books rules that create much of the current bureaucratic environment that constrains how teachers do their job (Carnegie Task Force on Teaching as a Profession, 1986).

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